

Sermon: A Different Platform
Text: Luke 6:12-23
Date: October 30, 2016
Context: WWPC
Season of Gratitude and Celebration
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Luke 6:20

Blessed are you who are poor. They are the first words of the most famous sermon Jesus ever preached, the first words of what I think it's safe to say is the most famous sermon of all time.

Blessed are you who are poor. In Luke, the sermon starts with four such blessings, or beatitudes as we now know them.

These famous phrases are deeply familiar to most of us, but in Luke's version they sound unfinished. When I hear them it's almost impossible not to "complete" them.

Blessed are the poor, Jesus says . . . *in spirit,* I instinctively add.

Blessed are those who hunger . . . and thirst after righteousness.

I would guess that this is how most of us hear them in our heads. And so without thinking we instinctively fill in the words and phrases Luke seems to have left out.

Except Luke didn't just accidentally omit them. He left them out on purpose. Because his gospel is a declaration of what the Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez calls *God's preferential option for the poor.*

Indeed, Luke's bald focus on the economically disadvantaged, the poor to use a simpler word, has troubled more than a few readers over the years including, it would seem, his gospel-writing colleague, Matthew.

It's his version of this sermon that we're more familiar with, more comfortable with, the one we always quote in our heads when the beatitudes are mentioned, or when we find them cross-stitched and mounted in a nice frame on our grandmother's wall:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

There are several significant factual differences between these two accounts of this famous sermon. In Matthew, Jesus preaches it on a hillside – hence the Sermon on the Mount; in Luke he delivers it standing on a flat place – so, the Sermon on the Plain.

Matthew offers eight blessings, Luke only four.

Luke's version contains a series of so-called "woes" directed squarely at the wealthy, which are completely absent from Matthew, and Luke makes no attempt at all to bless the peacemakers.

But maybe the biggest difference between these two accounts is Matthew's insistence on spiritualizing these blessings.

Why does he do this? We don't know for certain because Mathew never gave his reasons. And as you can imagine, scholarly theories vary widely.

But you may have gotten a sense of one possible reason for yourself, when I read Luke's version.

If the poor alone are blessed, where does that leave the rest of us, people who look like us, and dress like us, and earn like us, and eat like us, and spend like us? It's an uncomfortable question.

Maybe it made Matthew uncomfortable, too. He is a tax collector don't forget. His pre-disciple job depended on there being rich peopled, and he was probably one himself.

Or maybe Matthew knew from his own experience that money can't buy love or happiness; he knew what it's like to feel empty inside even when your pockets are full, and so he knew that the poor in spirit deserve a blessing, too, because he himself was one such person.

Or maybe the better question is why did Luke keep his focus so narrow to begin with?

To help explore a possible answer, I'd like for us to engage in a brief imaginary exercise.

I want to strip away the poetry and the familiarity of these words, and to try to hear them anew. To try to hear them the way Luke intended his readers to hear them.

Jesus is fresh from a night spent in prayer. We don't know exactly what that looked like for him, or how he filled those nighttime hours, whether he spent them on his knees, or pacing back and forth, or lying flat on his back, shouting his praise, or voicing his complaints, to heaven.

We don't even know what it was, exactly, he was praying for, our about. Except that praying all night is what you do when you know something big is coming, when sleep is out of the question because you're on the cusp of a decision that will change your life and, in his case, change the world.

Because when morning breaks, the first thing he does is call his disciples. Out of the great crowd that has begun following him everywhere, he picks twelve apostles, lieutenants if you will, to help him carry out his mission.

That done, he comes down off the mountain with the twelve, and the crowd of other, would-be disciples follows them.

So now, I invite you to close your eyes and imagine that you're in this crowd. Let your mind travel back to that time and that place.

It's just after dawn and you can already smell the smoke of cooking fires. You don't bother with a fire because when you heard that this Jesus was coming to your area, you left the house so fast you forgot to bring any food.

So after spending a chilly night out in the open, you're cold and hungry but you don't care because if what you've heard about this guy is true, something special is about to happen, something extraordinary, something you've been waiting for now for several years.

You're there because everything has changed since the Romans occupied your family's lands. Your great, great grandfather planted vineyards in the Judean hills and your family has been making wine ever since.

You sold the wine mainly to the temple in Jerusalem and to other smaller synagogues for ceremonial purposes, but it was just enough to provide for your family and maintain a reasonably comfortable life.

But the Romans won't let you sell to the temple. They don't like Jewish religion or Jewish wine. Now only Roman gods and Italian wine will do.

To drive this point home, they went so far as to pour salt on your fields. So, now, you're suddenly destitute, nearly penniless, desperation rising in your heart and your throat.

Imagine you're that person.

Or, keep your eyes closed if you will and stay with me a moment more, maybe in your case, your husband suddenly grew seriously ill just five months ago.

You didn't have much money to begin with – he's just a simple farmer, and you're but a simple farmer's wife – but in those months you've visited a dozen so called healers -- charlatans and hucksters, all – and spent everything you had on trying to find a cure for him.

Now, not only is your husband still sick, your money is all gone. Which is why you're now standing on this plain in your worn out sandals and your threadbare traveling cape. Because you are literally poor, and your kids are literally hungry.

But you, too, have heard the rumors about this new traveling teacher, the stories about the healings and the miracles. And so you've come out to hear and see him for yourself. Deep down you don't really believe he's going to be able to change anything, or offer you words that will make any difference, but here you are anyway, because you've got nothing to lose.

Suddenly you hear his voice, and it's like nothing you've ever heard before.

*Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

Your head, which had been hanging down in hopeless resignation, immediately snaps up.

*Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

Either way, whoever you are, the words jolt you. Because no one has ever blessed you before. Your father passed away suddenly ten years ago, right as you were coming of age. As your bar mitzvah approached, he took you aside to tell you these vineyards would one day be yours.

But then he died and he never laid his hands on your head, never told you how much he loved you. Never pronounced those words every Jewish boy, every boy ever born anywhere, longs to hear: "Bless you my son."

Or maybe in your case, you realized just the other night as you were putting your daughter to bed and stroking her hair, that your mother never blessed you.

You craved her approval, longed for her unconditional affirmation, but rather than her blessing, you got questions instead, pointed questions, with the sting of criticism built in:

You're wearing that to the Passover feast? Hmph. Is it just me or have you been enjoying a few too many date bars lately? Really, you're in love with Moshe? You can't do better than to marry a butcher?

But now, suddenly, you hear these words:

*Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

These blessings feel like they were intended specifically for you. And, yes, that's true in a sense. But they're not only for you because Jesus is not just offering his listeners an individual blessing.

He's launching heaven's own insurgency. A new regime, where the poor have first place in the new world order.

If this were an election, he'd likely get creamed. No national politician, not then, not now, ever focuses on the poor.

But Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah, is not a national politician. Not until the last week of his life does he enter the capital to press his case with the powers that be. Instead he spends his time, he spends his life, in the provinces, with the country folk, because he's a grass roots activist, a people's prophet.

He speaks and teaches and preaches on hillsides and on the plain, from the bow of a boat just offshore in a lake, and in the homes of ordinary people, because his is an entirely different platform, unlike any we've ever seen or heard before or since.

It's not driven by ideology. It's driven by love and compassion, especially for the least of these, for the last and the lost and the lonely, the hungry and the excluded, the wounded and the sorrowful, for those of us who are broken in body or in spirit, those who are hungry for food or for justice, or both.

Which is why the sequence of this story matters so much. After a night of prayer, he comes down off the mountain and the first thing he does is recruit help.

Even Jesus realizes he can't do it alone. He knows it will be impossible to implement this platform, to prosecute this insurgency, by himself.

He needs partners. And so he comes down from that mountain and names them: you, you, you, you're with me. We're in this together because implementing the reign of God on earth is going to take a team.

What was true then is still true. We need partners too.

Serving the poor, ministering to those in need – the hungry, the homeless, the vulnerable – has always been an important part of the life of this congregation.

And we've now made our commitment to this work official. Goal #2 in our new Ministry Plan reads as follows: *Deepen our engagement with and service to the wider community.*

Like Jesus, we can't do this work entirely on our own. We need partners and we have some of them with us here today. And in this season of gratitude and celebration, we want to express our gratitude to them for the work they are doing, and celebrate the chance to partner with them in it.

As these folks can tell you, serving the poor, the people on the margins, the vulnerable members of our world – which now includes creation itself, our rivers and forests and streams, the trees and birds, the flowers, the bees – this work can be exhausting, a never ending struggle.

Maybe that's why Matthew added those concluding phrases to Luke's leaner pronouncements not because, say, feeding the hungry was too simple, or too narrow, but because it was too hard.

But in the end he must have known that Luke was right, that Jesus was right. For toward the end of his gospel he records one last sermon. It appears in no other gospel but his. And this is how it ends:

Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing . . . sick or in prison and visited you?

And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my brothers and my sisters, you did it unto me."

Amen